Preface to an Unprintable Opus

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To An Unprintable Opus

BY

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THUS and thus and so and so do the writers of the history books declare it came about that the magnificent lord, Don Cristóbal Colón, more familiarly famed as plain Christopher Columbus, did dauntlessly venture forth upon the uncharted reaches of the Western Ocean and discover a new world. And very much as they say, so, perhaps, it may have been, for, despite the clash of opinion explicit in the interpretations these authorities of final resort have placed upon some of the obscurer, and, therefore, more or less debatable, details of his life, one cannot blink the fact that a substantial state of accord does exist among them in their accounts of the mighty endeavours and the signal achievements of the Grand Admiral of the Ocean Sea. And those accounts have generally been accepted as truth and sedulously promulgated as such by the pedagogues, to the success of whose labours certain poets have lent very encouraging support—so helpful in one instance, indeed, that there is nowhere in the U. S. A. any considerable number of schoolboys who at some time or another do not leave behind them first the Gates of Hercules, and next, by virtue of poetic license, the gray Azores, and then sail fearlessly

on and on through shoreless seas with Columbus and Joaquin Miller.

But the present-day devotees of whatever reincarnation is currently enjoyed by Clio, the minor deity whom the Ancient Greeks knew as the divine inspiration of the classical annals of antiquity, would seem to be totally unaware of the existence of a vast body of material which recounts in metrical fashion many formerly unrecorded vicissitudes that beset, and numerous hitherto undisclosed adventures that befell, the great discoverer in his persistent quest for a new route to far-away Cathay and the fabulously opulent Indies.

Broad, free, uninhibited, it is a lusty saga, largely unknown to the generality, unheard even save on such occasion as when the more swaggeringly boisterous of those who fight the wars of the U. S. A., who perform the more romantic portions of that country's work, and who go down to the sea in its ships feel impelled, upon adequate imbibition of the requisite stimulus conducive to the proper lyrical celebration of epic themes, to do honour to the puissant navigator's nautical exploits. It is a narrative that is the despair of all squeamishly right-minded persons, and one that is particularly obnoxious to the compatriots of the famous geographer, who, incidentally, provide the larger share of the fanfare and the fireworks for the annual anniversary of his most notable accomplishment. In view of these considerations, one may seek in vain for even the merest mention of the ballad in those ponderous tomes that pre-

tend to hand down history to posterity.

Although of no significance to the prosaic chroniclers of past events, the essential details of the circumstances attendant upon the origin and authorship of this graphically realistic historical excursus still remain more or less green in the memories of certain men who seem to take a greater delight in providing profane footnotes to sober history than in writing sober histories of their own. Indeed, those circumstances are really not yet of so great an age as to have become deeply shrouded in any mysterious and vexing investiture of hearsay and legend, for the history of the ballad goes back just three years more than half a century. And curiously enough for so serious a theme, a comic opera character seems in all innocence to have been indirectly responsible for its beginnings,—no less a personage, in fact, than that wily military strategist who so blatantly boasts of his intrepidity upon the field of battle in the first act of Sir William Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan's *The Gondoliers,*

> The celebrated,
> Cultivated,
> Underrated
> Nobleman,
> The Duke of Plaza-Toro!

A very fetching sort of fellow, this braggart Duke; and not one whit less engaging is his blustering song. From the first performance of the *opéra bouffe* on December 7, 1889, ardent Savoyards fondly took that song to their hearts, but

there would appear to be no intimation that any enormities in parody were perpetrated upon it immediately after its first presentation to the public, as is often the fate of many a popular ballad.

My Home in Tennessee will be remembered as a classic instance of a song that was early subjected to considerable travesty: not one, but two, and perhaps more, irregular offspring were its lot. *The Tattooed Lady* sprang from it, as did also that gripingly gripping memoir of high venereal adventure which has

> I'll be hunchback'd
> When I get back
> To my home in Tennessee

for its melancholy refrain.

The Tattooed Lady also has its variants. Senor S——— S——— includes one of them in his anthology of famous music hall ballads, while another, said to be sung by Don M——— C——— upon very slight encouragement, goes thus:

> I paid a bob to see
> A Scotch tattooed lady.
> She was a treat to me,
> Tattooed from head to knee.
> Right beneath her jaw
> Was the Royal Flying Corps,
> While across her back
> Flew the Union Jack.
> And could one ask for more?
> Then up and down her spine
> Stood the King's own guard in line,
> And all around her hips
> Steamed a fleet of battleships.
> Right above one kidney

Was a bird's eye view of Sydney,
But what I liked the best
Was right across her chest,
My home in Tennessee.

But enough of digression. Let us get back to the Duke's song.

So far as the evidence goes then, the form and substance of the original would not seem to have been trifled with at once. That came later—about three years after the Duke had first bellowed it forth, when one of the entertainments current in the city of Chicago for the delectation of visitors to the Columbian Exposition was a comedy opera, *The Isle of Champagne*, produced by the Thomas Q. Seabrooke Opera Company. As a tribute to the hero of the occasion the cast sang a ditty in passable doggerel entitled, appropriately enough, *Christofo Columbo*, which, in the recollection of some of those who were there and at one time or another witnessed performances of *The Isle*, was not a part of the original libretto composed by Senors Charles Alfred Byrne and Louis Harrison, —and in this particular the memories of these retrospective old-timers serve them well—, but had come to be incorporated therewith as an interpolated afterthought. Its author and composer was one Francis Bryant. The verse scheme he employed was very much like that of the Duke of Plaza-Toro's song, while the tune also was highly reminiscent of the Duke. In this, its original version, *Christofo Columbo* went as follows:

I'll sing to you about a man
Whose name you'll find in hist'ry;
He solved a problem very deep,
Which long had been a myst'ry;
Navigators young and old
Gave way to him quite fitly;
His name it was Columbus,
And he came from sunny It'ly.

He knew the earth was round, ho!
That land it could be found, ho!
This geographic,
Hard and hoary
Navigator,
Gyratory
Christofo Columbo.

To the kings and queens of Europe
Columbus told his theory;
They simply thought him crazy, . . .
And asked him this here query:
How could the earth stand up if round?
It surely would suspend;
For answer C'lumbus took an egg
And stood it on its end.

He knew, etc.

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two,
'Twas then Columbus started;
From Palos on the coast of Spain
To the westward he departed;
His object was to find a route,
A short one to East India;
Columbus wore no whiskers,
And the wind it blew quite windy.

He knew, etc.

When sixty days away from land,
Upon the broad Atlantic,
The sailors they went on a strike
Which nearly caused a panic;

They all demanded eggs to eat
For each man in the crew;
Columbus had no eggs aboard,
But he made the ship lay too.

He knew, etc.

The hungry crew impatient grew,
And beefsteak they demanded;
Equal to the emergency,
Columbus then commanded
That ev'ry sailor who proves true,
And his duty never shirks,
Can have a juicy porterhouse,
"I'll get it from the bulwarks."

He knew, etc.

Not satisfied with steak and eggs,
The crew they yelled for chicken;
Columbus seemed at loss for once,
And the plot it seemed to thicken.
The men threatened to jump o'erboard;
Columbus blocked their pathway,
And cried, "If chicken you must have,
I'll get it from the hatchway."

He knew, etc.

The sailors now so long from home
With fear became imbued;
On the twelfth day of October
Their fears were all subdued,
For after ninety days at sea
They discovered America's shore,
And quickly made a landing
On the Isle of Salvador.

He knew the earth was round, ho!
That land it could be found, ho!
This geographic,
Hard and hoary
Navigator,
Gyratory
Christofo Columbo.

These verses comprise what is generally conceded by those who are the leading, and, at the same time, the most retiring authorities on the song to be the earliest recorded version of the *Christofo Columbo* ballad. And they would seem to be entitled to the seal of priority, even though a strong suspicion of the authenticity of their claim to that distinction has been raised by Senor V——— S———, the scholarly hidalgo of Chicago, who recounts an incident in his ingeniously fantastic *Puertos del Mer en la Luna* which would almost incline one to believe that the song was in existence ages ago, that snatches of it had been sung even while Columbus was endeavouring to obtain the caravels in which he later made his memorable voyage of discovery.

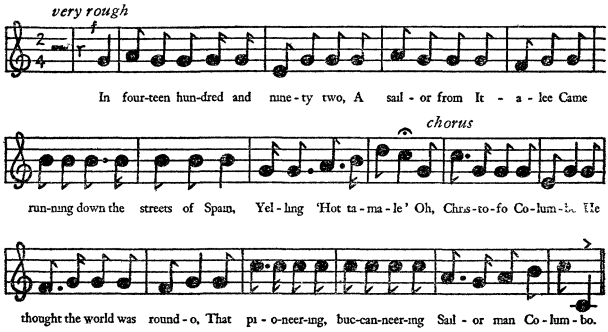
As Senor S——— relates the story, the sorely tried geographer was making one of his frequent calls at the camp of the Spanish army which was engaged in the expulsion of the Moors to plead his case once more with the King and Queen, who, it seems, spent much of their time in observing the progress of the conquest. In fact, the future discoverer had sought royal audience there so often that the soldiery, to whom he was become a familiar and not unpathetic figure, had taken to making sport of him. On this particular occasion of which Senor S——— writes, Columbus engaged in an exchange of verbal blows with them, from which encounter he emerged victorious and then continued on his way to the royal pavilion. "Yet," and I quote from Senor S———'s narrative, "yet,

before he was out of hearing, his ears were burning, as he heard the words of the ribald ballad they hurled after him:

> He swore the world was round-o,
> That land it could be found-o,
> That captivating, fascinating,
> Son of a bum, Columbo!"

Thus, Senor S——— would have us believe, the chorus of the song was sung in those far-off days. But he has not adduced one single shred of evidence that would warrant acceptance of the incident as being grounded in historical fact, and therefore one cannot but conclude that in this particular instance Senor S——— has merely been a bit intemperate in the flex of his imaginative faculties.

Now, patently, there is nothing reproachable in Francis Bryant's pleasantly jingling lines, or in any of the other later anonymous ones on the same subject, written in slightly different form—the original eight-line stanza reduced by half—and in somewhat more varied vein, which have been printed in book and magazine. The chaste pages of *Country Gentleman* were in no wise sullied by the version supplied in the columns of that widely read agricultural journal some years ago by the noted twentieth-century troubadour, Don C—— S———:



Columbus came from Italee,
He was full of green confetti.
He showed the Queen of Spain
How to gargle her spaghetti.

Oh, Christofo Columbo,
He sailed the whole world round-o,
That pioneering, buccaneering
Sailorman Columbo.

When Chris got back to sunny Spain
He told them of bonanzas.
They answered him, "We notice, Chris,
You ain't got no bananas."

Oh, Christofo Columbo
Had his feet upon the ground-o,
That persevering, buccaneering
Sailor lad Columbo.

Columbus told his mates one day,
"Look here, my dear old pards,
In a couple of months we'll all have jobs
In the Chicago Union Stockyards."

Oh, Christofo Columbo
Thought the world was round-o,
That pioneering, buccaneering
Sailorman Columbo.

And to another recorded version, slightly different in form, somewhat broader in scope, no one, unless he were a Comstock, could ever take very violent exception, and a Comstock would find fault with it only on the ground that its verses were too tepid:

In fourteen hundred ninety-two a lad named Chris Columbo
Put all geographies and maps upon the royal Bumbo.

He said the world was round-o, he said he'd find Chicago,
That Genoese with the bumpy knees, that bozo named Columbo.

At that time reigned a fair young queen of Spain named Isabella,
Who cast an amoroshus glance at Chris, the smart young fella.

He said, etc.

Columbus went to Isabelle to stock up his exchequer;
'Tis said he more than stocked it up—the dirty low homewrecker.

He said, etc.

Now Isabelle, she pawned her jewels, and gave to Chris the ticket,
And said how glad she was to find scientific men were wicked.

He said, etc.

When Chris sailed out to sea at last, the queen was sad and tearful;
The king was laughing up his sleeve; 'twas his time to be cheerful.

He said, etc.

Columbus had a second mate he loved just like a brother;
They never went a single place, the one without the other.

He said, etc.

The trip was long, the boys arrived, they ripped off shirts and collars;

The Indian maid who welcomed them made twenty thousand dollars.

He said, etc.

When Chris sailed back to Spain again, the queen was still a sinning,
But not with Chris this time, alas; another had his inning.

He said the world was round-o, he said he'd find Chicago,
That Genoese with the bumpy knees, that bozo named Columbo.

It is evident then that the fancies of sundry well-meaning parlor versifiers had been taken by the easy tune and the simple rhyme scheme of Francis Bryant's rollicking ballad. But these would-be poetasters held no monopoly on the sources of their inspiration. A far greater number of rhymsters belonging to the latrine school of poetry likewise had had their fancies captured thereby, and the adherents of that school also busied themselves in the confection of a metrical narrative concerning the peripatetic geographer's adventurous life that should conform to their own ideas of history debunked. Hundreds, nay, thousands of verses were made and sung by them in the eighteen-nineties and the early nineteen hundreds, verses mostly of minor interest, it is true, because so often purely local or personal in allusion or subject matter.

Yet, among those that dealt straightforwardly with the venturesome cosmographer's character and personal habits, and with the main facts of his memorable voyage, a considerable number may justifiably be held as of more than passing inter-

est to the student of civilization in its higher manifestations. Of this category are the gems that concern themselves intimately with the sex perversions attributed to the brave Admiral by the respective authors of those verses. And on a par with their lines stand the numerous other verses that burgeoned from an imaginative preoccupation with the doughty discoverer's mighty prowess in giving vent to his flatulent griefs, and in voiding his excrement, and in discharging his urine, "of which," as one scholar who laboured prodigiously in the field of folk song during the early nineteen hundreds exclaims, "there must have been oceans!"

Reputedly, the greater number of the better verses were fathered in the noddles of the more earnest and the more reverent college students of the day. Especially did those who were painfully undergoing the processes involved in preparing themselves as an answer to a call to the cloth indulge in this poeticizing pastime for respite from the irks of arduously studious application and the dolors of wearisome eremitic meditation. Harvard and Yale and Princeton and other citadels of culture and temples of theology teemed with students who contributed copiously to the neo-columbiad.

Nor was interest in the theme confined only to cloistered halls. Some of the more mundanely inclined writers of the period are credited with the authorship of a number of brilliantly scintillant verses. Frank Stockton, a high authority in his

day on rovers of the main, produced several which, it is understood, were exquisite—unfortunately they have not been identified—, and Mark Twain, quite appropriately, as befitted a former river pilot not wholly unfamiliar with the traditions and the folkways of seafaring men,—witness his pungent characterization of the intrepid sea rover, Sir Walter Raleigh in *1601*—, also swelled the song's sum total of verses.

By the end of the first decade of the present century the ballad had become known wherever in the U. S. A. lusty men raised their voices in song. The soldiers of the regular army sang it, as did the wandering labourer, the cowboy, the roustabouts of the waterfront, whence sailors took it to all the ports of the world, making it in a way their own by adopting it as a chantey. From the regions beneath the Southern Cross to the lands that the Pole Star looks down upon, from any spot on the globe upon which one might choose to put one's finger, all the way round to the antipodes thereof, it has been sung, in all six of the six continents and in all seven of the seven seas. And if any credence may be placed in the occasional underground reports about the ballad that trickle through from foreign parts, many a benighted outlander, to whom the words that compose the honoured navigator's name were the only intelligible ones in the song, has been unduly impressed by the pious veneration in which the people of the U. S. A. seem to hold the memory of Christofo Columbo.

THIS *edition of Professor Pococampo's* PREFACE *—a work hitherto available only in the very rare original bi-lingual, part English, part Spanish, printing (twenty-five copies from the Press of the University of Ferdinand and Isabella, N.P., n.d.)—has been prepared for the press by Walter Klinefelter, who, in addition to expressing his indebtedness to the several copyright holders hereinbefore noted, earnestly desires to make known his deep appreciation of the truly Castilian courtesy with which the Syndics of the University of Ferdinand and Isabella met his request for permission to issue Pococampo's brief, but provocative, monograph in a form that would present the entire work in the English tongue. Seventy-five copies have been printed by The Southworth-Anthoensen Press, Portland, Maine, in this the four hundred and fiftieth year of the discovery of America.*

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Walter Klinefelter